

IT, offshoring and skill atrophy

I am writing this Houston bound on a Boeing 777. Such is the comfort of modern air travel in economy, that I was able to dine elegantly off the forehead of the gentleman in the seat in front prior to writing this article standing up. Incidentally, I urge fellow travellers to boycott foreign exchange in Britain until the thieving lot reduce the spread, (now approaching 18%). Money is very significantly cheaper to buy in Europe. Wait until you get where you are going.

In recent months, I have noticed a gradually accelerating call by the CBI and other 'industry leaders', that we do not appear to be training enough people in IT. I also note our Chancellor wishing to turn up the heat on technology. Why this should take anybody by surprise seems to me a little odd. For the third or fourth year on the run, most universities are struggling to make their ever diminishing quota of undergraduate entries in computing. The general understanding seems to be that not many want to do IT these days because like mathematics, physics and a number of other sciences before it, it is now considered boring, or horror of horrors, hard. I'm afraid undergraduates are much smarter than that. Nowadays we have something called university fees and no grants and undergraduates currently graduate on average with a debt of several thousand quid. Fine, but given the recession in IT in the last few years, what would you expect an intelligent teenager to study? Well certainly not IT. Something which is likely to give them a chance of paying off their debts would be closer to the mark. A directly associated and even more worrying trend is the difficulty in getting home-grown students to do postgraduate courses, an essential part of a technological society. So dear members of the CBI, industry leaders and politicians, if you want people to study things which take a few years to get good at, don't expect to be able to switch it on and off like a tap. Of course if the general idea of IT skills is the ability to be able to send an e-mail or use a word processor, most of them can already do that without being taught.

Which brings me nicely to the subject of offshoring. The people who seem to be worried about the skills shortage seem to be not entirely unconnected with those who think offshoring is a pretty neat idea. Let me put this rather bluntly. If offshoring continues to grow, it will decimate the IT industries of the UK (and other western countries) on price alone. It is no use saying we will have to compete. We already do in terms of quality but we have to support a modern sewage system and many other pieces of infrastructure which we do not wish to be without. Our offshoring competitors do not. I use our high street supermarket because if I and others do not, it will disappear and I will have to drive to one of those awful megastores which punctuate the ring roads. If your only criterion for IT systems procurement is price, then please do not bother asking us to produce more IT specialists several years too late. They need jobs but not as much as you need them.

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